Tutū the Tūturiwhatu

Written and illustrated by Abi Liddell

It’s winter in Aotearoa.

Deep down south on Rakiura, Tutū the tūturiwahtu is arguing with his mum.

His mum wants them to leave their home at Table Hill tomorrow and fly all the way to Awarua Bay on the Mainland.

“Come on Tutū, it’s where the biggest and yummiest crabs are!”

“But Mum,” Tutū whines. “It’s too far away!”

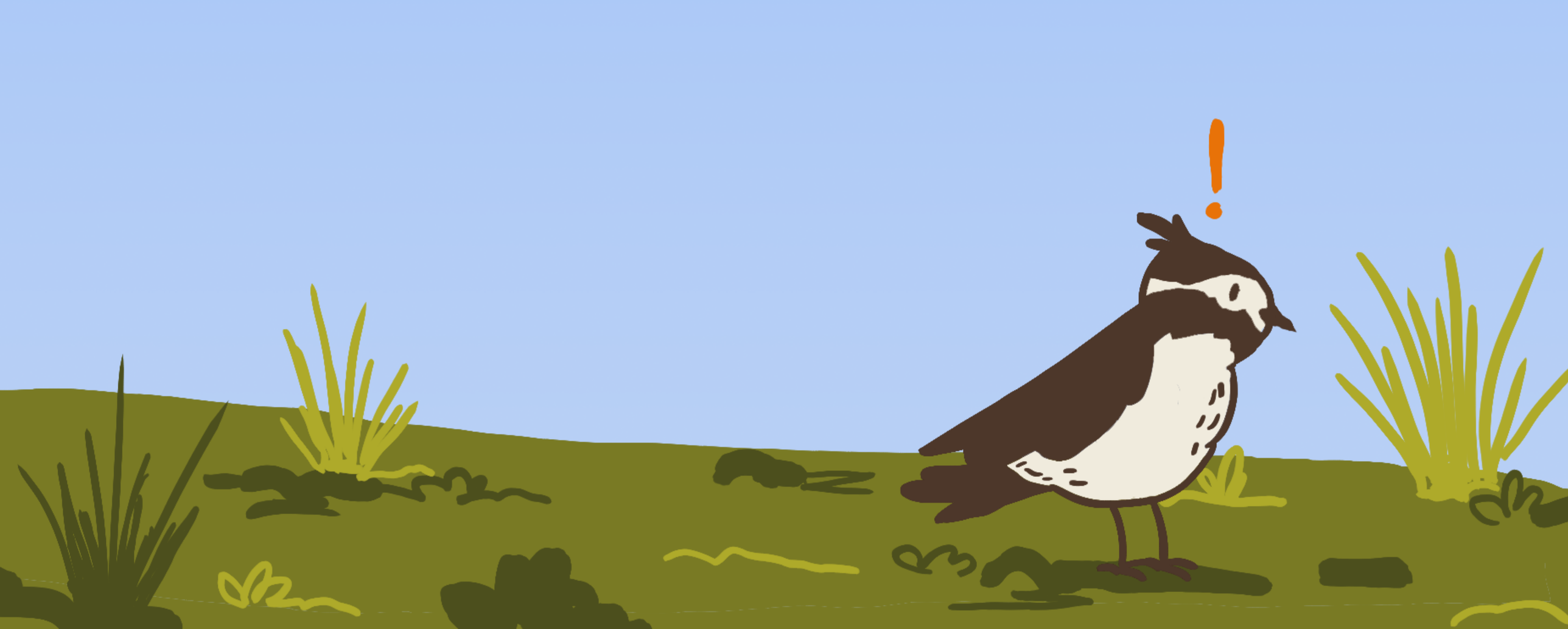
“The food in Awarua is bigger and there’s more of it than here on the Island. It’s the best feeding ground around! We’re leaving tomorrow.” His mum says firmly.

Tutū storms out of the nest, stomping his feet.

Why did he have to go all the way to the mainland when there was food on this island? His cousin was at Mason Bay a week ago and had bragged to Tutū that it was the best feeding ground!

Tutū stops in his tracks.

He could fly to Mason Bay and bring back some of the huge crabs to prove to his Mum that the tastiest food is on the island, then they could go feed at Mason Bay instead of flying all the way to the mainland!



With his plan in place, Tutū sets off.

He takes flight, skimming the tussocks and rocks that cover his home. As he flies down the hill the tussock and rocks turn into twisted trees and thick bush.

Tutū’s wings start to get tired. He drops lower in the sky, until he’s barely above the forest.

Suddenly, his wing hits a branch, and he tumbles down to the forest floor.

Tutū slowly stands up, ruffling his wings and wiggling his toes. As he glances behind him to check if he still has all his tail feathers, a gravelly voice interrupts him.

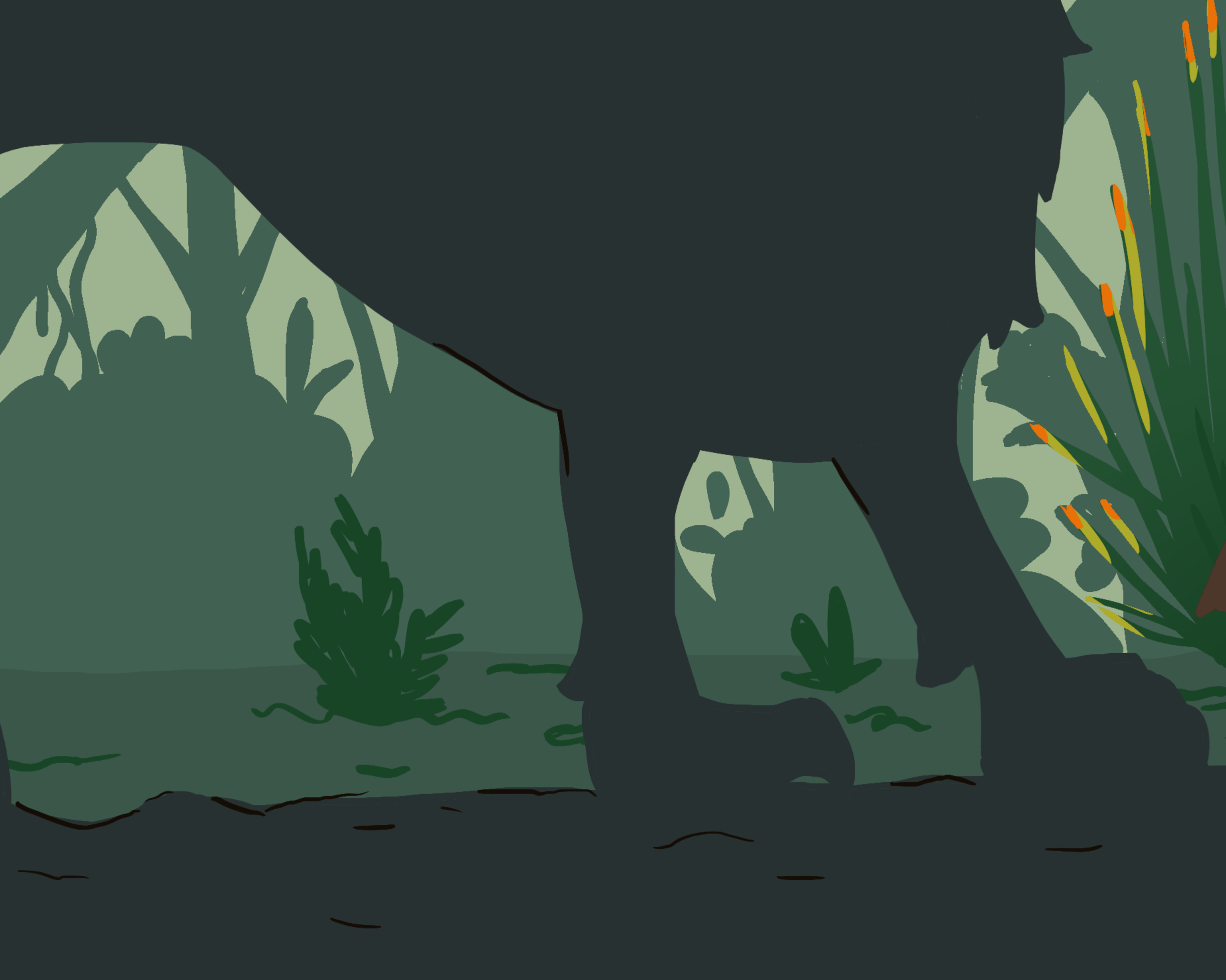
“That was an impressive landing little bird.”

Tutū whips around, his heart pounding.

From the shadows emerges a monstrous creature with cruel yellow eyes, pointed ears, and sharp claws. Tutū gulps. It was a feral cat, the most dangerous animal for tūturiwhatu.

“You’re all alone and very far from home,” the cat draws back its lips, revealing sharp fangs.

“I’m not alone!” Tutū stutters, desperately looking around for a way to escape. The edge of the forest, where trees give way to tussock and sand, was just behind the cat.



“You’re lying little bird,” the cat’s eyes narrow. “I don’t like liars.”

Finally, Tutū spots something.

A few birds-length away from him was taramea plant. Taramea may look harmless, but Tutū knew that the end of each blade of grass sharpened to a needle-like point. This was it, his chance to escape.

All he had to do was lure the cat towards the taramea.

“No please, I hurt my leg when I fell. Surely it would be too easy to just eat me now!” Tutū started to limp slowly towards the bush, watching the cat’s hind legs.

“Injured and alone? I thought this snack couldn’t get easier.”

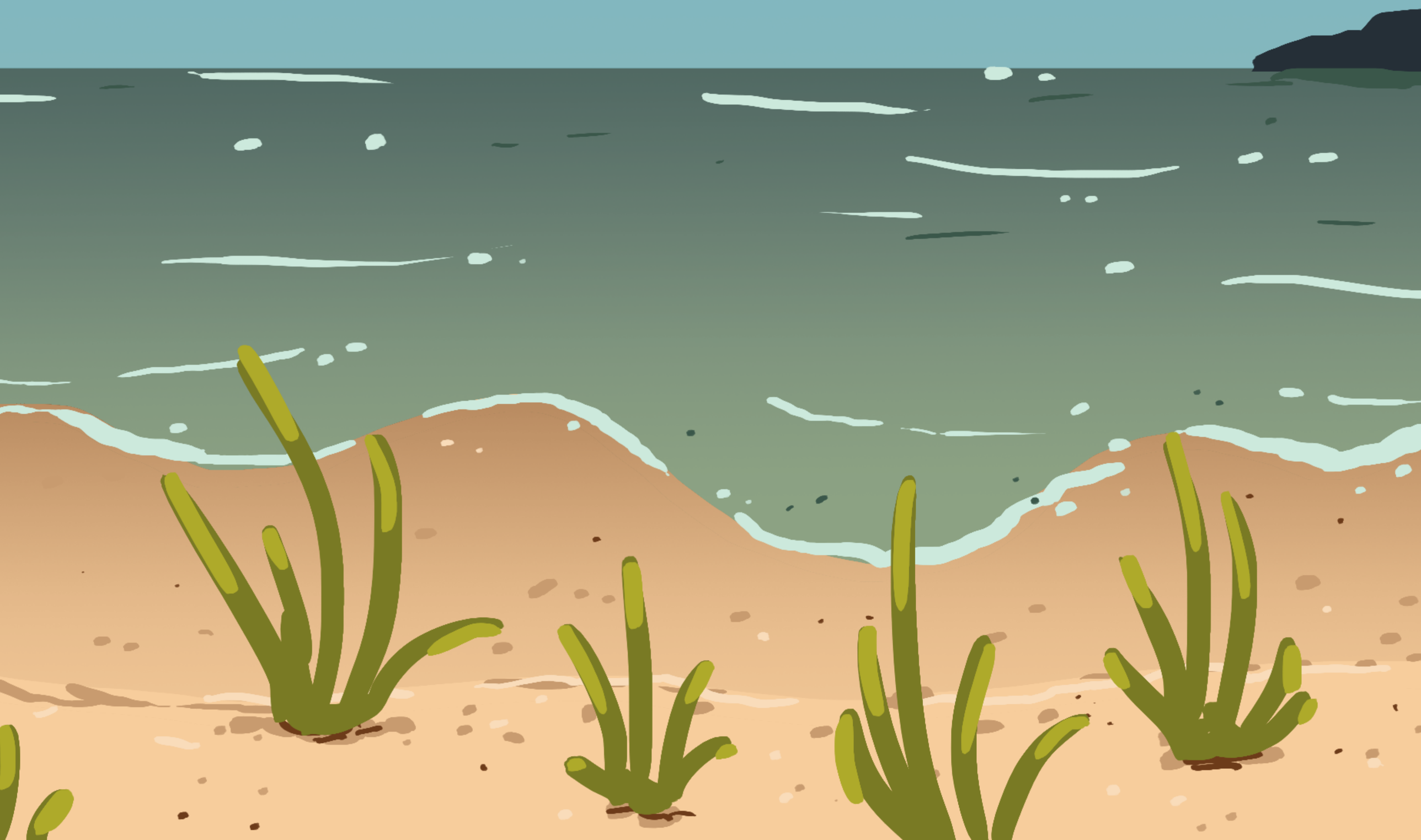
The cat’s back legs bend, just as Tutū positions himself in front of the taramea.

The cat launches itself towards Tutū with outstretched claws, but at the last second Tutū dives out of the way and sends the cat hurtling straight into the taramea.

There’s a loud screech as the cat bowls into the spiky bush, but Tutū doesn’t stick around, instead rushing out of the forest.

Tutū bursts out of the trees into the sandy dunes that border Mason Bay.
He scrambles up the dunes and stops to catch his breath.

The bay spreads out before him, windblown sand stretching seemingly forever and sparkling waves lap at the shore.



Tutū can’t stop to enjoy the view. He has a job to do.

He glides down to the wet sand by the water’s edge and starts poking around, looking for big, tasty morsels of food. But the only crabs he find are tiny - no bigger than a baby beetle!

Refusing to give up on his search, Tutū keeps searching in the wet sand until the sun is close to setting.

Eventually Tutū flops to the ground in a huff, tired and frustrated. He’s been searching for hours and all he’s found is a few tiny crabs.

It didn’t make sense, his cousin had told him there was massive morsels of crab everywhere at Mason Bay!

Tutū’s out of time. He has to get home before sundown, when most of the cats start prowling, so he has to leave now.

Wings drooping with disappointment, he trudges to the top of the sand dunes and launches off the top, flying back towards his home.

Tutū flies over the forest where he outsmarted the cat. He flies up the hill and over the edge of the forest, where trees turn to tussock and rock. He flies all the way to the top of Table Hill, skidding to a stop near his nest.

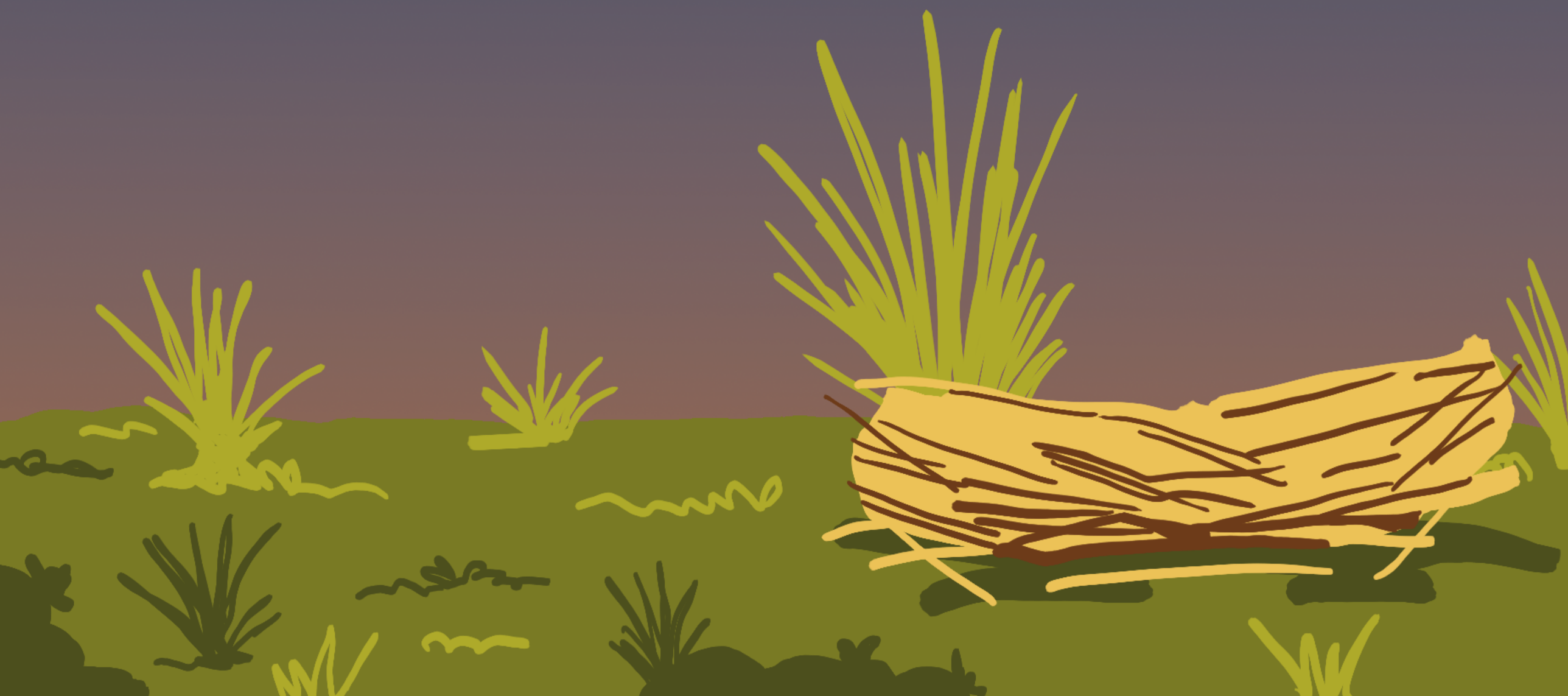
As he lands, his mum frantically rushes over. “Tutū! Where have you been? I’ve been so worried!”

“My cousin told me that Mason Bay was the best feeding ground on the island. I wanted to prove that there are big crabs there so we wouldn’t have to fly all the way to Awarua Bay.”

Tutū hangs his head. “But I was wrong. I got there and I couldn’t find any crabs bigger than a beetle!”

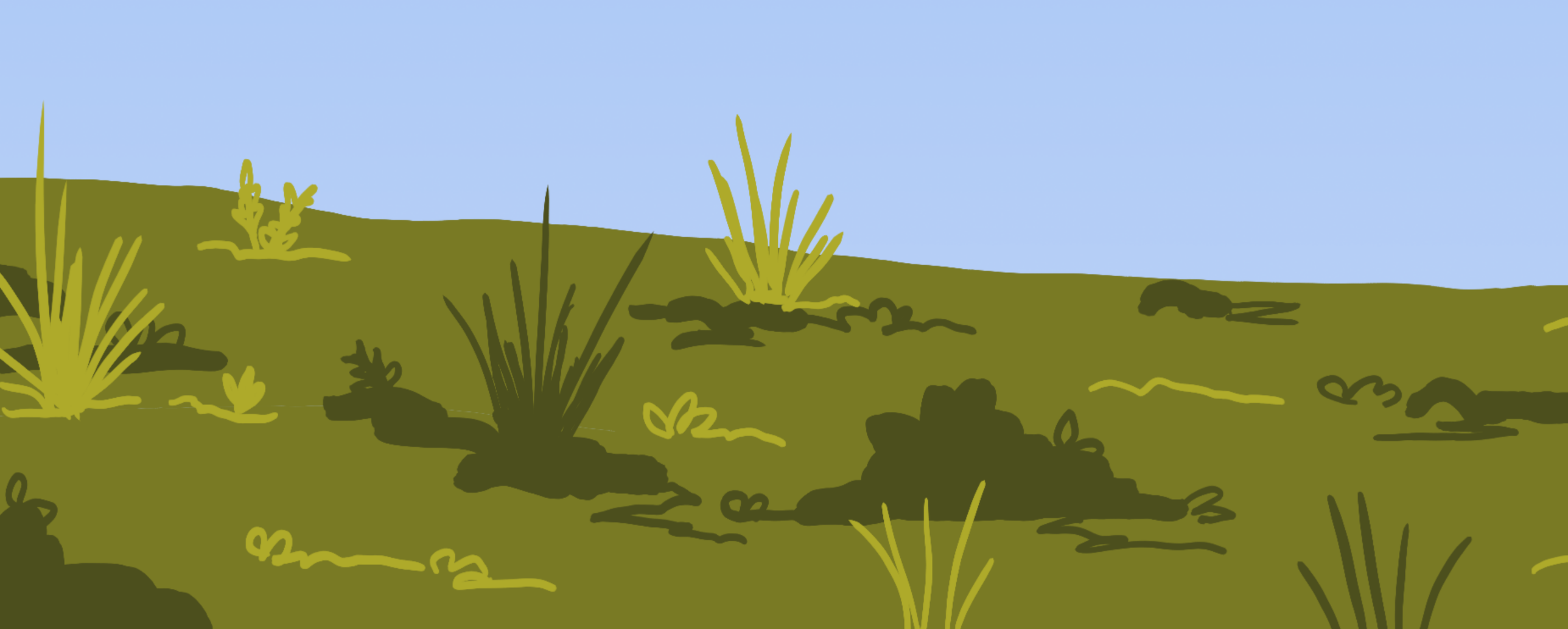
“Oh Tutū,” sighs his mum. “Your cousin is young, and was trying to impress you. The sea is shallower at Awarua Bay than Mason Bay, so there are bigger crabs in the warmer waters there. You look tired. Let’s go to bed and talk in the morning.”

Tutū nods, settles into the nest, and drifts off to sleep.



The next morning, Tutū wakes up and finds his Mum.

“Mum, I’m sorry for making you worry. I won’t go off by myself again.”



Tutū nods. “I think it’s time we left for Awarua Bay.”

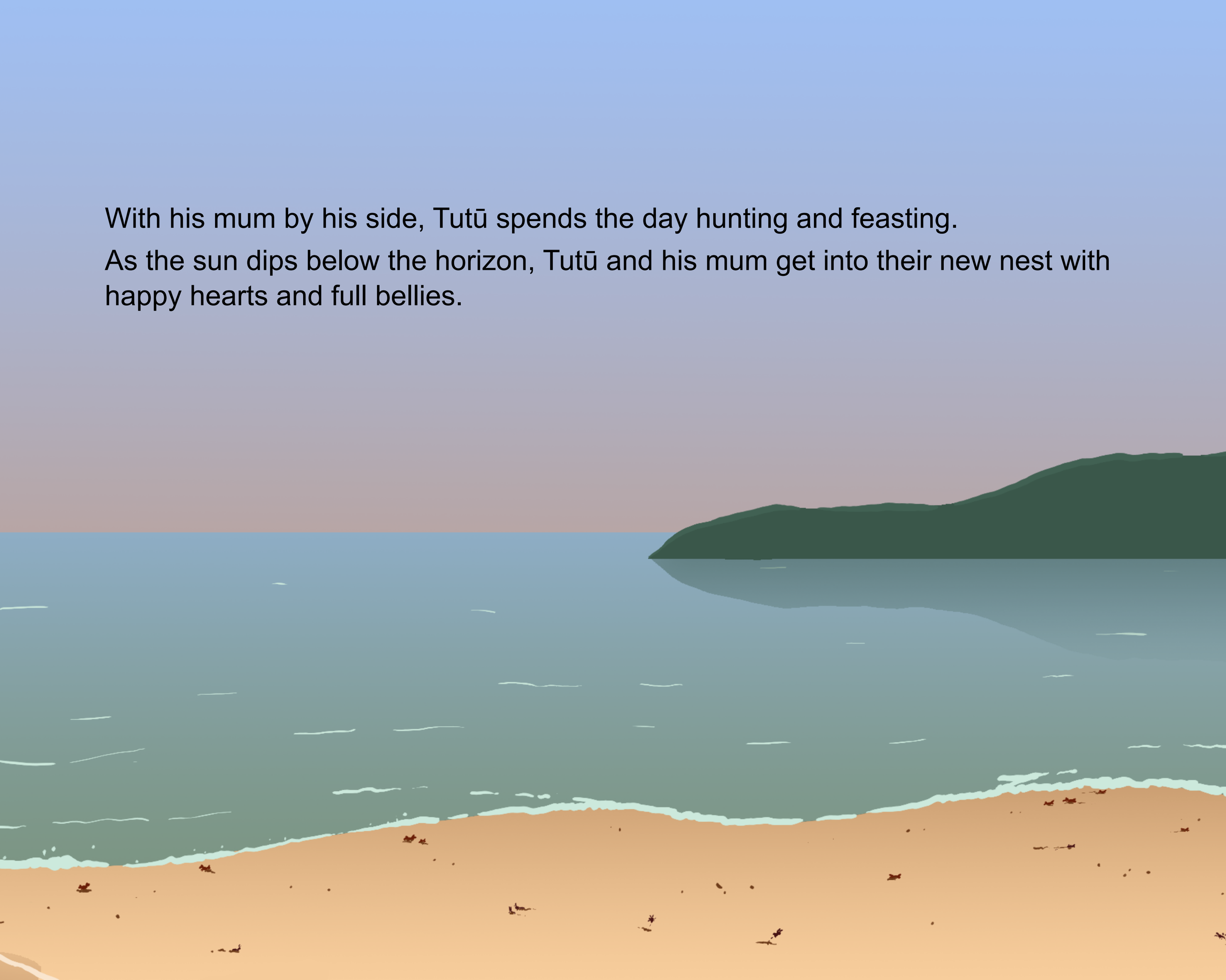
Tutū and his Mum take off, flying towards the Mainland.

When they arrive at Awarua Bay, Tutū sees shallow waters filled with the biggest crabs he’s ever seen!

They’re way bigger than the puny crabs he’d found at Mason Bay.

With his mum by his side, Tutū spends the day hunting and feasting.

As the sun dips below the horizon, Tutū and his mum get into their new nest with happy hearts and full bellies.



Author's note.

The Southern New Zealand Dotterel (tūturiwhatu) is one of the most endangered birds in the world. The population estimate from April 2023 reveals that there are less than 150 Southern New Zealand Dotterels left alive, and their numbers are still declining.

Southern dotterels are endemic to Aotearoa, and only breed in alpine regions on Rakiura (Stewart Island).

Juvenile Southern Dotterels have a pale chest year-around, occasionally with patches of orange. At the time of publishing, it is unknown at what maturity they start to develop their breeding plumage.

To help support the Southern New Zealand Dotterel, consider donating to NZ Nature Fund to aid pest control efforts and fund monitoring and research of this special bird.

Donate at www.nznaturefund.org

Tutū the Tūturiwhatu

Banded at the Bay

Written and illustrated by Abi Liddell

It’s a beautiful autumn day at Awarua Bay.
The ocean laps calmly at the sand, glistening in the sunshine.

Just above the waterline, Tutū the tūturiwhatu is searching for food.

It’s been months since Tutū flew to Awarua with his mum, and in that time Tutū has grown bigger.

His chest isn’t plain white anymore, now it has patches of reddish-orange feathers. He’s also left the nest he shared with his mum, and now has his own nest in the dunes at Awarua Bay.

As Tutū gobbles down a big, yummy crab, he glances up and notices something in the distance.

Hiding at the edge of the sand dunes are two figures. Looking closer, Tutū can see that it’s two large, featherless birds wrapped in green shells.

One of them is taller than the other and has short feathers on its head. The other one is smaller and has longer head feathers.

Tutū’s curiosity gets the better of him, and he hops closer to the strange creatures to see what they’re doing at the Bay.

As Tutū makes his way towards them, suddenly something slips tight around his leg.

“Help!” Tutū squawks, trying to fly away. But the more he struggles the tighter the wire loop around his leg becomes.

Tutū frantically flaps his wings, trying to escape.

He’s too focused on getting free that he doesn’t notice the featherless birds have dropped their bags and made their way over to him. He doesn’t even notice them until one of them picks him up in his claws!

“Meep!” Tutū cries out as the larger featherless bird untangles his leg from the thin wire that’s around Tutū’s leg, and lifts him off the ground.

“Kia ora little buddy, it’s okay we’re not going to hurt you,” the featherless bird’s claws are squishy, not sharp. Tutū doesn’t hear what his captor says, too busy looking for an escape route.

Although his captor’s squishy claws are gentle, they keep him trapped and Tutū realises that he’s stuck until the featherless bird chooses to release him.

The smaller featherless bird reaches into the bag they’re carrying and pulls out three tiny colourful plastic bands and one metal one.

Tutū watches as they hand them to the larger bird, before turning to Tutū with worry in their eyes. “Why do we band them? The poor thing looks so scared!”

The larger bird takes the bands.

“It’s okay, banding doesn’t hurt them. He might be scared now, but he’ll be just fine later.” They gently take the bands and start to fasten them around Tutū’s legs.

“We band birds so that we can identify them. This means we can find the answers to questions we might have about this little dotterel, or it’s species as a whole! We can figure out how many birds there are, where they live, how old they are, and how far away it flies from home!”

The other featherless bird looks confused. “What do the different colours mean?”

“The bands on the left leg are the ones we read first. The metal bands have an identifier stamped into them. The coloured band above the metal one tells us what year the bird was banded in. Each year starts with a new band - this year we’ll start with a white band,” the taller bird explains.

“The left leg has two coloured bands to use as identifiers, so that we don’t have a bunch of birds with just white and metal bands. The colours on the right leg help us tell the birds apart.

So, no colour means anything specific by itself, but put the coloured bands together and we can tell which bird is which! It’s a really important part of our work as Rangers.”

Tutū blinks up at the large creatures. So, they’re not featherless birds at all. They’re Rangers!

After the fourth and final band is secured around his leg, the ranger gently places Tutū back on the sandy ground.

“Ka kite little tūturiwhatu!” The smaller ranger calls after Tutū, as he hurriedly flies back to his nest.

When he reaches the safety of his nest, Tutū checks out his new accessories.

His left leg now has one white band and one metal band, while his right leg has one orange and one dark blue band.

‘They don’t hurt at all,’ he thinks, as he moves his leg around to get a better look.

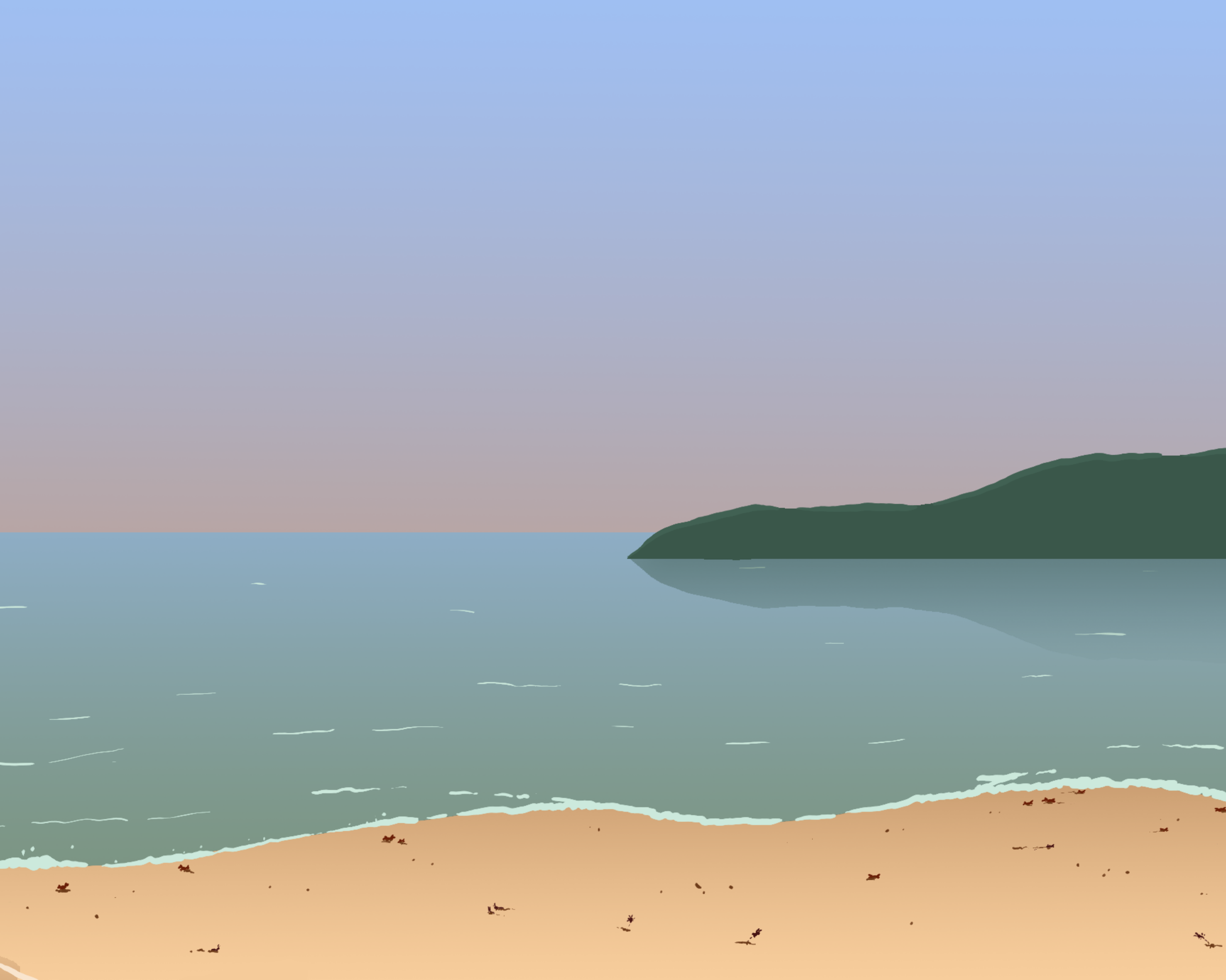
In fact, he thinks, as the metal one shines in the light, they look kind of cool.

After admiring his new bands, Tutū hops out past the tussock to see the two rangers packing up their equipment.

They pick up the mat with the wire on it that they used to catch Tutū and sling their bags over their shoulders and start to walk back down the beach.

Once the rangers are out of sight, Tutū realises that although being banded was scary at first, the rangers hadn’t hurt him one bit. They were experts, who had handled him gently with their big squishy claws and kept him safe.

As the sun starts to set, Tutū settles into his nest and wonders when he’ll see his new ranger friends again.



Author's note.

The Southern New Zealand Dotterel (tūturiwhatu) is one of the most endangered birds in the world. The population estimate from April 2023 reveals that there are less than 150 Southern New Zealand Dotterels left alive, and their numbers are still declining.

Southern dotterels are endemic to Aotearoa, and only breed in alpine regions on Rakiura (Stewart Island).

From March/April to June, Southern Dotterels have a pale white chest, sometimes with patches of orange.

Around June, their chests start to become more orange as their dark rusty orange breeding plumage begins to develop.

To help support the Southern New Zealand Dotterel, consider donating to NZ Nature Fund to aid pest control efforts and fund monitoring and research of this special bird.

Donate at www.nznaturefund.org

Tutū the Tūturiwhatu

Tutu's Quest to Share his Nest

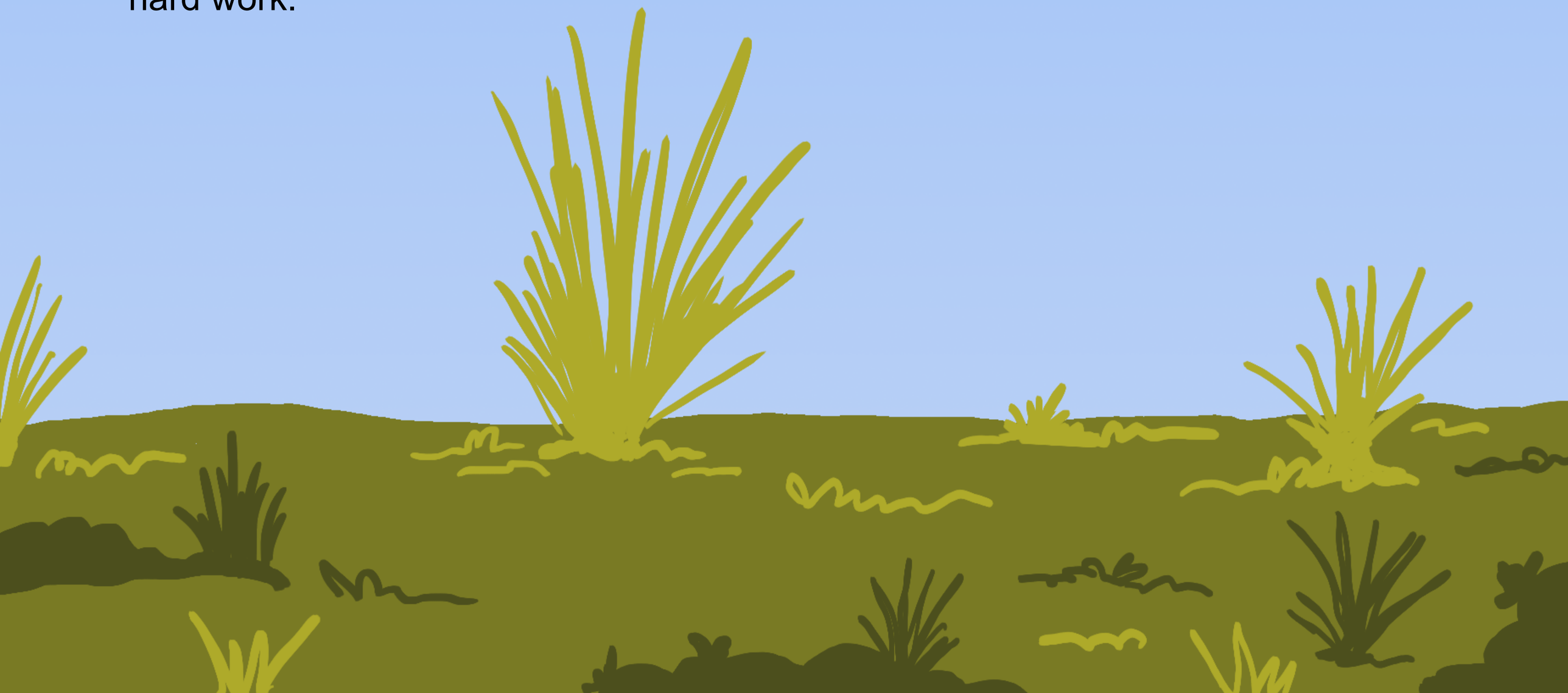
Written and illustrated by Abi Liddell

It’s a warm summer’s day on Rakiura.

Up on the top of Table Hill, Tutū the tūturiwhatu is making his first nest all on his own.

Tutū’s feathers have changed drastically. His chest feathers that were once white with orange patches are now all a rusty orange colour.

After Tutū puts the last twig in place, he steps back and surveys the result of his hard work.



It’s a wonderful nest, tucked away in a small outcrop in the ground so it was sheltered from the wind.

The only problem with his new nest is that he has no one to share it with.

Tutū scans his surroundings, looking for any other tūturiwhatu.

To his dismay, there’s no one else in sight – he’ll have to go looking for someone to move into his nest with him. And he knows just where to start searching.

His heart full of determination, Tutū sets off on his quest, soaring down from the Table Hill peak to the boggy alpine flats below.

As Tutū glides above the flats, he spots something moving on the ground.

Maybe it’s another tūturiwhatu!

Tutū swoops towards the soggy ground, but as he gets closer he sees that it isn’t another tūturiwhatu, rather it’s a pohowera searching for food.

“Hello Ms. Pohowera,” Tutū greets the other bird as he lands. “Have you seen any other tūturiwhatu around here? I’m looking for someone to share my nest with.”

“I heard that there might be some more tūturiwhatu near the bush line,” the pohowera chirps, fluffing her wings.

The pohowera looks similar to Tutū, however she’s much smaller and has only a small band of dark orange feathers on her chest. “You should go check there!”

“Thank you!” Tutū flies off, leaving the pohowera to continue foraging for food.

Filled with hope, Tutū heads down the mountain until he reaches the bush line, where the tussock and scrubs are replaced by shrubs and flowering trees.

Tutū spots someone flitting between the trees. He flies over and spots a beautiful green korimako practicing his songs among the flowers of a mānuka tree.

“Hello Mr. Korimako!” Tutū calls. “I’m looking for someone to share my nest with. Have you seen any other tūturiwhatu?”

“Not around here,” the korimako trills. “But I think I saw some flying toward the western ridge!”

“Thanks for your help!” Tutū takes off once again as the korimako sings a goodbye.

Tutū flies up towards the ridge, noticing the wind getting stronger as he reaches nears the top. As he struggles against the wind, he notices a familiar figure crouching on the ridge.

It’s one of his ranger friends from Awarua Bay!

The ranger is crouching over a wooden box, holding a weird metal contraption that has a stinky bit of fish attached to it.

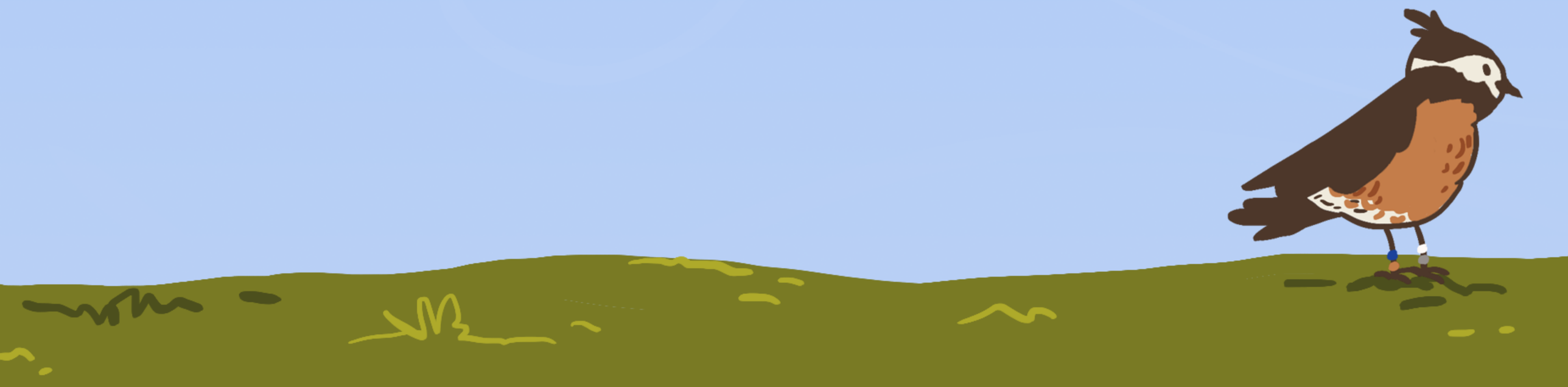
Curious, Tutū flies over and lands close to the ranger, chirping out a greeting.

“Kia ora friend,” the Ranger greets Tutū with a smile.

Tutū hops closer, wondering what his ranger friend is doing. He watches the ranger put the metal fish-stick back inside the box.

“This is a beslile trap,” the ranger explains as they shut the lid. “I’m re-baiting all the ones around here to catch dangerous predators, so you and all the other tūturiwhatu will be safe.”

Tutū ruffles his feathers, grateful that there are rangers willing to brave the howling winds to protect him from danger.



“I haven’t seen any other tūturiwhatu up here today though, I think they’re all sheltering from the wind on the east side of the hill!” The ranger points towards one of the hills in the distance.

Tutū’s eyes light up.

Chirping in excitement, he takes off once again, heading towards where the ranger had pointed.

The wind disappears as he gets closer to his destination, and when he’s above the sheltered side of the hill he spots a whole group of tūturiwhatu!

In his excitement Tutū’s landing is not very graceful. He nose-dives to the ground, tossing and tumbling along until he skids to a stop near the group of tūturiwhatu.

Trying not to look too embarrassed, he stands up and shakes the moss out of his feathers.

To Tutū’s dismay, most of the other tūturiwhatu only snicker at his clumsy landing before continuing to searching for food.

Tutū hangs his head. “I’ll never find anyone here who wants to move into my nest,” he mutters, his heart sinking. “That was so embarrassing.”

“I don’t think that was too embarrassing.”

Tutū looks up and meets the eyes of a tūturiwhatu with a green, metal, green, and yellow band on her legs.

“My name’s Karaka, and I’m looking for a nest to share with someone. If your nest is comfy enough, I’ll move into it with you,” Karaka chirps.

Tutū lets out a happy chirp. “That’s amazing! I’ll show it to you!”

Tutū and Karaka set off back to Tutū’s nest.

They fly back over the ridge where the ranger is still hard at work, and past the bush line where Mr. Korimako is practicing his songs.

They glide over the boggy paddock where Ms. Pohowera is foraging, before they finally reach the top of Table Hill and land next to the nest Tutū has so carefully crafted.

“Here’s my nest,” Tutū says proudly, watching as Karaka hops over to it.

She circles it once, twice, three times, before clambering in and settling down.

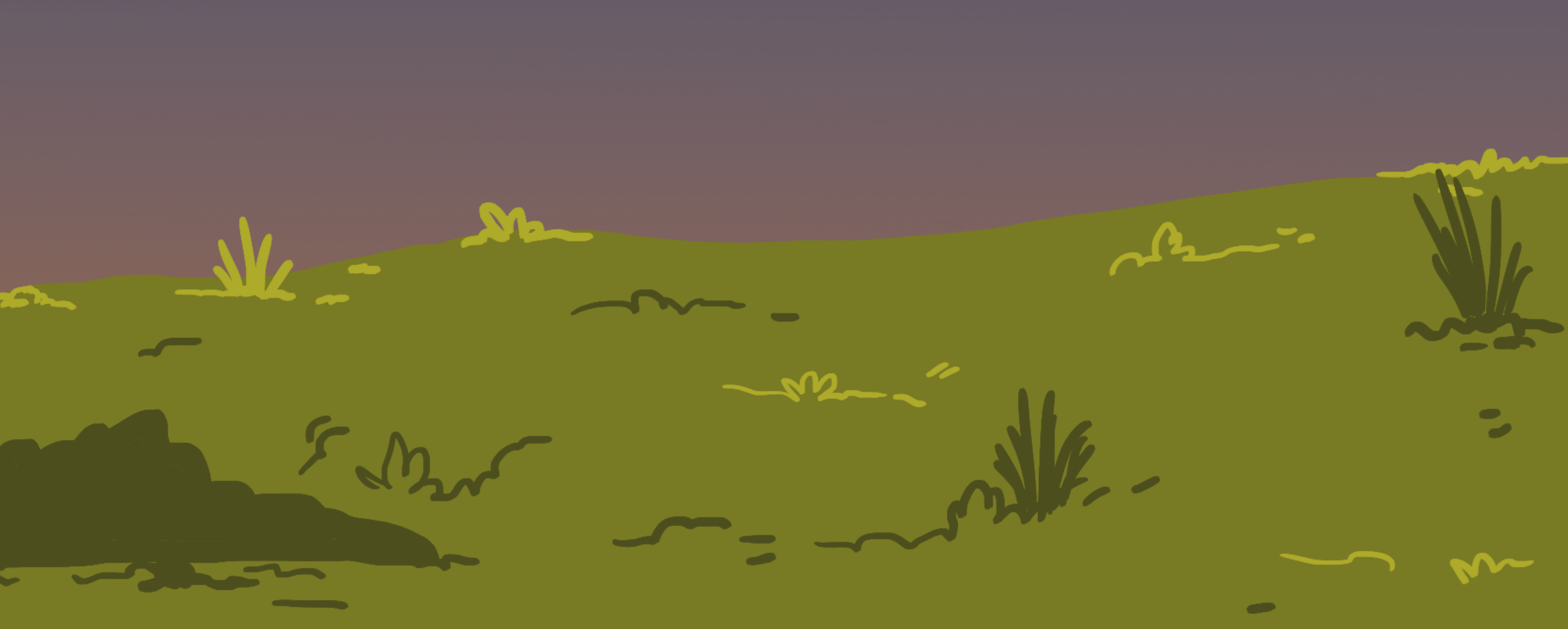
“Wow,” she exclaims. “Tutū this nest is wonderful! I’d be happy to share it with you if you’ll have me.”

“Of course!” Tutū chirps with happiness.

Tutū clambers into the nest next to Karaka, thrilled that he has finally found someone to share his nest with.

As the first stars start to glimmer in the sky, Tutū and Karaka drift off to sleep.

Their feathers ruffle together in the gentle night’s breeze, and they sleep well knowing that the home they now share is not only a nest made of branches and twigs, but also a home in each other’s hearts.



Author's note.

The Southern New Zealand Dotterel (tūturiwhatu) is one of the most endangered birds in the world. The population estimate from Apri l 2023, reveals that there are less than 150 Southern New Zealand Dotterels left alive, and their numbers are still declining.

Southern New Zealand dotterels are endemic to Aotearoa, and only breed in alpine regions on Rakiura (Stewart Island).

From August/September, adult Southern Dotterels develop rusty orange chest plumage, indicating that the breeding season is about to begin. This breeding plumage begins to fade from October to January, and their chests return to a pale white around March.

To help support the Southern New Zealand Dotterel, consider donating to NZ Nature Fund to aid pest control efforts and fund monitoring and research of this special bird.

Donate at www.nznaturefund.org